

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Will Washington's Hawks Get the Syria War They've Always Wanted?

Ted Galen Carpenter

April 7, 2017

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's comment that it must be up to the Syrian people to determine whether beleaguered President Bashar al-Assad stays in power signaled a significant change in Washington's Syria policy. The Obama administration had consistently maintained that no settlement of the Syrian civil war was possible if Assad remained in power. Only the timing of his departure was deemed a pertinent issue for negotiation—and Obama's foreign-policy team made even that concession grudgingly.

The apparent shift in policy has triggered outraged responses from the usual flock of hawks in the United States. Their fury intensified when just days after Tillerson's comment, another chemical attack took place in Syria, killing dozens of civilians. As with the Sarin gas attack in 2013, Western officials and news media were quick to put the blame at the feet of Assad's government. They did so even though the actual source of the 2013 attack remains uncertain, and even though some evidence pointed to a "false flag" operation by Islamist rebels with the covert assistance of Turkey's government.

American hawks who demonize Assad exhibited no uncertainty about the perpetrator of either incident. Sen. John McCain railed against the Syrian dictator. “As we once again bear witness to innocent people writhing on the ground and gasping for breath, we know Assad not only disregarded his chemical weapons commitments, but continues to carry on mass atrocities with impunity,” McCain said in a statement. “Unless and until Assad pays a price for his brutality, the slaughter and destruction in Syria will go on.” Instead of backing off on demanding Assad’s ouster, the Trump administration must “take action to address this strategic and humanitarian disaster, which has led to more than 400,000 Syrians killed and six million displaced,” McCain said. Sen. Marco Rubio asserted that it “was no coincidence” that the gas attack took place right after Secretary Tillerson and other administration officials indicated a softened policy toward Assad.

Such indictments would have more credibility if McCain and other rabid critics of Assad displayed similar disgust regarding other brutal tyrants. But that is frequently not the case. “Thank God for the Saudis and Prince Bandar,” John McCain told CNN’s Candy Crowley in January 2014. “Thank God for the Saudis and Prince Bandar, and for our Qatari friends,” the senator said once again a month later at the Munich Security Conference. On yet another occasion he referred to Saudi King Abdullah as a “vocal advocate of peace” and a “critical partner in the war on terror.” McCain bestowed his praise on the Saudi regime even though it has a dreadful human rights record, as documented in reports from Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Among the regime’s many atrocities are the barbaric beheadings of political opponents who dare to criticize the government or protest against its policies. Apparently some thuggish dictators are more palatable than others to American hawks.

Too many U.S. critics of Assad tend to see the Syrian civil war as a political melodrama, featuring the Syrian dictator as an archvillain and his adversaries as noble freedom fighters seeking a better, more democratic Iraq. The reality is far more complex and murky. Assad is assuredly an odious ruler, but most of his opponents are hardly admirable pro-democracy advocates. Other than ISIS, the strongest faction consists of the Nusra Front (until recently, Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate) and other allied Islamist groups. Washington’s vain search for a strong “moderate” Syrian rebel force has persisted for years, but frequently borders on being a farce.

The conflict also reflects a power struggle between the largely Sunni insurgents and Assad’s coalition of religious minorities (primarily his own Alawite faction—a Shia offshoot, Christians and smaller sects) that fear the consequences of a Sunni-controlled regime. Not surprisingly, Iran and Hezbollah support Assad, while Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and other Sunni states have backed the rebels. The Obama administration displayed insufficient awareness of these many swirling political, religious and ideological currents in the Syrian civil war. Ardent advocates of a full-fledged U.S. military intervention seem utterly oblivious to them.

The Trump administration’s milder stance regarding Assad was a sensible, long-overdue policy shift. Unfortunately, at the same time, the administration is increasing the U.S. military presence in Syria to combat ISIS. That move simply leads the United States into the same quagmire using a different rationale. A realist foreign policy would indeed adopt a neutral position regarding Assad’s future, but it would also withdraw American troops rather than heightening their exposure to a murky conflict with very little potential benefit to the United States.

Unfortunately, Trump already is under excruciating pressure to abandon the new approach that Tillerson outlined. In the short term, it is imperative that the president ignore the calls of McCain, Rubio and other war hawks and avoid being goaded into taking military action against Assad for his alleged guilt in the latest chemical attack. Longer term, the administration needs to complete a comprehensive policy transformation and facilitate the exit of all U.S. military personnel from the Syrian civil war.

Ted Galen Carpenter is a senior fellow in defense and foreign-policy studies at the Cato Institute and a contributing editor at the National Interest. He is the author of ten books, the contributing editor of ten books and the author of more than 650 articles on international affairs.